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ABSTRACT

The emergence in Chicano poetry of the language experiments and folk wisdom of the oral traditions of barrio cuentos, corridos, dichos, and actos reveals that this literature is neither fleeting nor novel. Jose Montoya's "Resonant Valley" exemplifies the Chicano's preservation of ancient wisdom and practice in new formal experiments and contemporary settings. The sentiments of different sets of dichos emerge in the poem as the basis for the conflicting positions that make the poem possible, as well as the means of their resolution. (Author/AA)

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The Barrio Endowment to American Literature

For years, we castigated it as "Pocho," ridiculed it as "Spanglish," and, more recently, tolerated it as "Barrio Spanish." We used to observe insignificant surface details or some isolated variations. Then, we would declare that nothing interesting happens in American Spanish. How wrong we were!

While we flaunted our imperception, the vocabulary of "Barrio Spanish" was undergoing a phenomenal expansion. Its proportions are reminiscent of the similar growth in Renaissance English. Yet, those in charge of our language learning persistently condemned the change. "It is not Spanish, and it is not English." Our professors insisted that all we needed was a purge of a bad habit. That bad habit was visualized as a fusion of the Spanish and English lexicons, with a large repository of cant and archaism. That bad habit was "Barrio Spanish."

What educators and politicians failed to perceive, industrialists and corporate businesses have already exploited: A language enlarges its vocabulary to accommodate expansions in the culture it stores, never as an idle exercise.

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Cultural, political, industrial and social adventure are bursting forth in remarkable degrees from Colorado to Durango. The language of the dons cannot express it, nor can their prescriptions suppress it. These changes have their voice in the mother language of millions-- "Barrio Spanish."

Now, "Barrio Spanish" proffers a literature to enunciate and evaluate the Chicano experience. The frequent academic impression of Chicano literature is that it is an unforeseen social document, a spontaneous statement of transitory protest. How wrong again! Chicano Literature has a long, firm pre-literate base that displays the wisdom of vast unsophisticated experience-- if one listens for it. And, one must listen, for it appears in the sounds of the barrio.

In these pre-literate stages of Chicano literature, also lies the reservior of Mexican culture from which the Chicano derives identity. The cuentos, corridos, actos and dichos of the non-literary migrant emerge in the spirit, humane orientation and factual data of the present-day Chicano writer.

Besides acquiring the content for his writing from the colloquial traditions of his elders, the Chicano poet retains the older intuitive knowledge of language operations in his verse. He continues the oral traditions of the barrio in the images, symbols and control of pace that he

fashions from the structures and processes of his language.

One such poet is José Montoya. In "Resonant Valley," we discover fundamental sentiments and historical necessity for the poem in its underlying dichos. Dichos supply the poem's issue, which Montoya resolves in dicho-like conclusion. The compactness of the dicho emerges in Montoya's images and symbols lodged within his linguistic structures. The larger meanings of his effort are conveyed simultaneously with his tale of internal conflict within a sensitive Chicano child picking grapes. All components of the language contribute efficiently in dicho fashion to a unique artistic event. Montoya linguistically compels his reader to share in am important Chicano experience.

Barrio dichos taken collectively-- and sometimes individually-- convey the message of Chicano Literature: A unique Man with a unique Culture is now ready to interpret Life anew. In the Mexican lyric tradition, dichos display poetic rhythms, their own type of rhyme, and a regularly balanced structure. These are mnemonic features of the oral tradition.

However, as in the use of any proverbial touchstones as guides for important decisions, barrio dichos present

seemingly irreconcilable oppositions for the Montoya-persona of "Resonant Valley." One can imagine his questioning conscience, nourished on dichos like:

1. Dime lo que tienes y te dice lo que vales.
2. Diós dice, Ayúdate que yo te ayudare..
3. Valemos un pájaro en la mano, que cien volando.
4. Todos pagamos el pato.
5. Si al cielo quieres ir, respeta a tus mayores.

However, the young Montoya can justify a private interpretation of his life and experience with contrasting folk wisdom in the dichos like:

1. Si no le guste la lumbre retirese del fagón.
2. Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente.
3. No hay mal que por bien no venga.
4. Nadie es profeta en su tierra.
5. Mas vale solo que mal acompañado.

The eventual resolution of the boy's confusion appears summed up in dichos also:

1. Solamente el que cargo el bulto sabe lo que pesa.
2. Tambien de dolór se canta cuando llorar no se puede.

Resonant Valley

When I was

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Two faces of reality, comprehended equally, create ironic tensions in the experience of Jose Montoya. These tensions emerge powerfully in his poem, "Resonant Valley." "Resonant Valley" grapples with the fact that the external observable behavior of Montoya, the grape picker, is only virtual to Montoya, the thinker. For the moment of the poem, external reality becomes an unreal popular notion. Temporarily, at least, what Montoya knows and feels overpowers what he does. Release of the force of his restrained emotion upon his private intellectual lode compels a conquest of popular reality. The conquest occurs almost noncommitally in the surface narrative, but it happens overpoweringly in the structure of his language.

The surface movement gradually arouses the emotional impulse. Most of this force is generated by a context of suggestion, rather than by any oratorical rhetoric. For instance, the world of the Chicano field-worker is labor-dominated. From labor, then, comes his moral code, the basis for his machismo; from the setting of his labor, also, come the standards and objects of his aesthetics. So, Montoya effortlessly sets emotions afire when, early in "Resonant Valley," he labels a grape picker "lazy." Especially is this

true when that grape picker is identified with a family of skillful workers. Affront to family values is a serious affair.

Another set of emotions is aroused by Montoya's allusions to places where these experiences are duplicated daily: Fowler, Reedley, Del Rey, Selma, Clovis, Parlier, Kingsburg and Sanger. In the very sounds of these names, Montoya resurrects Mexican memories. Each place-name is di-syllabic with heavy stress on the first syllable; in this series, the names preserve the rhythms of the familiar church-bell call to Mass. The poet calls the names "musically chiming charming," giving a clue to their image in his young fantasy. Then Montoya shifts from telescopic viewing to microscopic exposition with images that are, at once, intensely personal and yet universal for anyone who has worked in the fields: the vines, the soil, the heat, the grapes, the trays-- and the worms, the wasps and the black widow spiders.

The tenseness of the emotion simply breaks and is quickly spent in the antepenultimate stanza. The internal knowledge and feeling are tersely balanced by a classic understatement of the external reality: "I remained lazy." The collapse of the emotion sets the stage for a close that compactly achieves two effects: First, Montoya suggests that his rebellion may have been simply a passing interruption in the long train of destiny, that the popular

reality, after all, is the durable reality.

On the other hand, his fable-like close holds a reference to an earlier insight: The insects are symbols for the field workers. One act of resistance gave temporary freedom to the oppressed: Perhaps, there is hope that Montoya's reality can supplant the popular one. As more Montoyas participate in his concern for worms and spiders and wasps, perhaps the relief he witnessed one summer may become lasting rather than transitory.

There is an early hint in "Resonant Valley" that reinforces such a view of the close: Just as Edwin Arlington Robinson symbolized a clash between smooth surface appearances and internal reality of conflict in his title, "Richard Cory," "Resonant Valley" pits opening and closing continuants against interior obstruents. The significant obstruents are juxtaposed at word boundaries in "Resonant Valley" in precisely the manner of "Richard Cory:"

/'rɪčad 'kɔri/ /'rɛzənənt 'vælɪ/

External appearances conceal internal resistances. And, this tension is elaborated in the pace of the poem. "Resonant Valley" commences and closed in almost monotonous flow, while its interior is torn with much impedence.

Beyond the title, the phonological art of "Resonant Valley" transcends the tiny hint in "Richard Cory."

For, Montoya immediately launches a quantitative verse reminiscent of John Milton's "Paradise Lost." Re-living the public estimate of his own slow work in the vineyards, Montoya experiments with phonologically "long" syllables, particularly at the boundaries of words. This experiment is regularly achieved by dominant continuant word closures, as in when, young and among: /hwɛn/, /jaŋ/ and/ə'maŋ/. Whenever meaning requires words with stopped closures, Montoya pits obstruents against one another across word junctures, as in un-domed Capitols: /ən'domd 'kæpətəlz/ in order to restrain the movement. Sometimes, he also slows his rate of articulation by forcing collisions of phonemes that require other articulation similarities: five hundred: /faiv 'hʌndrɛd/ or both hands: /boθ hæmz/. Consecutive fricatives slow the movement. Frequently, also he exploits the extendable feature of the open syllable at the close of words, as in ". . .how I knew:" /hau ai nu/. He sometimes opens an apparently closed syllable at the end of a word by utilizing English elision, as in the pride of: /ðə praid əv/ or But everyone said I: /bət evri wʌn sɛd ai/. It is, thus, possible to read "Resonant Valley" very slowly.

The surface sound purveyor of the Montoya experience simultaneously becomes the image of Montoya, the grape picker:

irresistably slow, and therefore, lazy. The sound experiment is relentless; it commences with the title and extends to the final word of the poem, sun: /sʊn/. The popular truth, then, is complete, uninterrupted phonological metaphor: The poem is slow; Montoya is slow, lazy and resistant.

As if the phonological restraints upon the pace of "Resonant Valley" were not enough, Montoya forces upon the reader an incessant concentration by his skillful manipulation of syntax. The syntax competes with the phonologically-conveyed public truth and Montoya's semantically-determined personal fact.

Throughout the poem, except for the final two stanzas, sentence structure is characterized by an easily recognized matrix -- or part of a matrix -- elaborately expanded by a variety of reduced embeddings. These embeddings are numerous, as in the opening elaboration upon the kernel, "I was lazy." An adverbial embedding, consisting of an adverb clause, three prepositional phrase expansions, and an appositive, itself extended by eight prepositional phrases, completes "I was lazy." Such syntactic complication exerts great restraint upon pace in the poem. However, this time, the restraint is not an unbroken continuum as was that of sound. The syntactic restraints come in bursts centered around the

matrix kernels. In this fashion, the syntax organizes a rhetorical exposition of Montoya's argument. The syntactic bursts depict Montoya's hesitations in his work in order to assure care for the insects.

In an almost journalistic arrangement, the poem presents the time, place, central figure, reason for its problem, emotional responses to the problem and, in the last two stanzas, a resolution. The stages are marked off syntactically by the isolation of the matrices: "I was lazy," "He!" "I knew. . .," "I wept," "Panic!" and "I remained lazy."

In contrast with the phonology and syntax, the semantic component of the poem builds a momentum to a point of intolerable pain. This emotional rush drives to a climax at the close of the second-from-the-last stanza. It breaks on the kernel, "I remained lazy."

In the last two stanzas, resolution of the tensions of the poem occurs, and a sensation of relief overtakes the reader. A transparent symbolism, surrounding "the worms, the wasps and the black widow spiders," exposes the poem's message. A balanced syntax that distributes its expansions through out the sentences replaces earlier syntactic compacting. The phonologically continuant close in "Beneath the sun," suggests the resolution may be lasting.

Liberated worms, wasps and spiders in the last stanza imply a liberated Aztlan. Combined with the phonological hint of its permanence, this notion might have generated a "Viva la Raza!" conclusion. However, the quiet close, "Beneath the sun," forces the reader to recall the cost of the liberation: One man's remorse, pain, panic, and his loss of the mark of Macho, his loss of pride and reputation. The final stanza not only suggests the durability of the release from oppression, but it carries a note that the sacrifice was worth it.

On the surface, "Resonant Valley" is the story of José Montoya. Phonologically, it is the stereotype of the Chicano field worker. Syntactically, it is the history of El Movimiento. Semantically, it is a reservoir of folk wisdom: lasting freedom will come to honest people. Stylistically, it requires the reader to re-live the Chicano pain in order to reach the quiet hope. No breath, no word, no sound, nor sentence entered Montoya's poem without effect. "Resonant Valley" is remarkably total in its linguistic art.